B. Alan Wallace

A Buddhist View of Free Will

Beyond Determinism and Indeterminism

Abstract: *While the question of free will does not figure as prominently in Buddhist writings as it does in western theology, philosophy, and psychology, it is a topic that was addressed in the earliest Buddhist writings. According to these accounts, for pragmatic and ethical reasons, the Buddha rejected both determinism and indeterminism as understood at that time. Rather than asking the metaphysical question of whether already humans have free will, Buddhist tradition takes a more pragmatic approach, exploring ways in which we can acquire greater freedom to make wise choices that are truly conducive to our own and others' genuine well-being. One key to achieving such freedom is the cultivation of attentional skills so that one can deliberately focus one's attention with continuity and clarity on one's chosen object. A second theme is the cultivation of insight into the manner in which our own attitudes shape experience, allowing for the possibility of altering not only the way we experience events in the present, but also how we are influenced by our memories of the past. Finally, the Great Perfection school of Tibetan Buddhism emphasizes the realization of the deepest dimension of consciousness — pristine awareness — which transcends the nexus of causality. This is regarded as the ultimate source of freedom and the ultimate nature of human identity.*

Determinism and Indeterminism, Ancient and Modern

Philosophers have been speculating on the existence or non-existence of free will for centuries, and scientists have been investigating this issue for decades, and they have come to no consensus, nor is this

Correspondence:
Email: balanwallace@me.com

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likely in the near future. So this essay is not intended to settle the matter philosophically or scientifically. Rather, it takes a pragmatic position of pointing out the obvious: there are circumstances under which we are more or less free to make wise decisions that contribute to our own and others' genuine happiness. The cultivation of such inner freedom is a central purpose of Buddhist meditation, as one moves beyond the intellectual challenge of trying to determine whether free will exists to the experiential challenge of realizing greater and greater freedom in daily life.

The diversity of Indian views concerning causality at the time of the Buddha was representative of the broader philosophical pluralism that marked that society as much as it does our world today, and the Buddha's novel responses to those views remain as intellectually challenging and pragmatically provocative as ever. Then as now, philosophers tended to fall into one of two general camps, of determinism and indeterminism. Among the former, some asserted that all pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral experiences are due either to past karma or to the will of God (St Thomas Aquinas, 1947, pp. 1, 23, 5). The Ajivikas maintained the fatalistic doctrine that all actions are predetermined by the external force of destiny (*niyati*), over which people have no control.[1]

This view coincides closely with the nineteenth-century, deterministic view that there is at any instant exactly one physically possible future (Laplace, 1814/1957; Van Inwagen, 1983, p. 3; Pereboom, 2001). This implies, for example, that the precise condition of the universe one second after the Big Bang causally sufficed to produce the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963 (Dennett, 2004, p. 84). The Buddha rejected all such fatalistic views regarding human action and experience on the grounds of there being inconclusive evidence to support them. Contemporary physics, which now includes quantum mechanics and chaos theory, also provides no support for determinism, so there are neither philosophical nor scientific grounds that force us to adopt that view.

Other ancient Indian philosophical schools rejected determinism in favour of the view that all experiences occur as a result of pure chance, with no prior causes or conditions (Raju, 1985, chapter 3). In some respects, this view parallels that of some contemporary libertarians who argue that the indeterminism demonstrated by quantum mechanics at the subatomic level carries over to the everyday world of human experience under various specifiable conditions. For human beings to be the ultimate source of our decisions so that we are truly morally

[1] *Dīgha Nikāya*, I.53

responsible, they insist, there can be no earlier influences that were sufficient to determine our subsequent actions (Kane, 1996; 1999).

In response to all the above views, the Buddha rejected on pragmatic grounds any theory that undermined the sense of moral responsibility. On the one hand, he rejected determinism as supporting 'inaction' — if one believes that one is not responsible for one's actions, the will to act in a wholesome way, and not an unwholesome one, is stifled. On the other hand, he rejected the indeterminism of asserting that all experiences and events arise due to pure chance, without reliance on any causes or conditions.[2] In addition, he concluded on empirical and rational grounds that there is no autonomous self that exists *apart from* and controls the body and mind, and he equally denied the existence of such a self *among* the psychophysical aggregates.[3] In taking this position, he refuted all notions of the self as an unmoved mover, as an agent that causes certain events, with nothing causing it to make its decisions (Chisholm, 1964/1982, p. 32; Foster, 1991). Thus, the sense that each of us is an autonomous, nonphysical subject who exercises ultimate control over the body and mind without being influenced by prior physical or psychological conditions is an illusion.

One may devote oneself to the path to freedom from suffering and its causes without knowing whether one can actually exercise freedom of will that is not totally determined by prior circumstances. However, it may be helpful to have a working hypothesis for free will to be actualized. One of the main sticking points for any Buddhist affirmation of free will is the nature of the self, or agent, that possesses it. We have already noted that no autonomous, controlling self can be found either among or apart from the dynamic processes and constituents of the body and mind; and this is the basis for the Buddhist assertion of 'no-self'.

The same type of analysis that is applied to the self can be equally applied to all other phenomena. For instance, the Buddha asserted that a chariot, like the self, does not exist as a substantial thing independent of its individual components. It is not equivalent to any of its individual parts, nor does the entire collection of those parts constitute a chariot.[4] The term *chariot* is something designated upon an assemblage of parts, none of which, either individually or collectively, is a chariot. The chariot comes into existence only when the label *chariot*

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[2] *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, I.173–175; *cf. Majjhima Nikāya*, II.214; *Dīgha Nikāya*, I.28; *Samyutta Nikāya*, II.22.

[3] *Majjhima Nikāya*, I.230–235; *Samyutta Nikāya*, III.66.

[4] *Samyutta Nikāya*, I.135; *Milindapañhā*, 25.

is designated on the basis of those parts. In the same way, the term *I* is imputed on the assemblage of the body and mind, which are not, by themselves, a real self. 'I' come into existence only when I am conceptually designated as such. When most of us use these concepts and conventions, including the words *I* and *mine*, we grasp onto the referents of those labels as being real, independent of our conceptual projections; and this is the delusional basis for all mental afflictions, such as craving and hostility. Those who are free of delusion still use those concepts and words, but they are not fooled by them.[5]

Such ontological analysis can be applied to the body and mind and all their constituent parts in the same way that it is applied to the self, so that the self is no more or less real than any other phenomena.[6] Therefore, just as we can meaningfully speak of a chariot performing certain functions, so can we refer to the self as an agent who makes decisions and engages in voluntary activity.

If the only way of affirming human identity is as such an autonomous self, and if that is required for the existence of 'free will', then both are clearly refuted in Buddhism. Hegel, William James, and the Buddhist tradition all agree that if you, 'Isolate a thing from all its relations, and try to assert it by itself; you find that it has negated itself as well as its relations. The thing in itself is nothing' (Caird, 1883, p. 162). The existence of such an isolated self is refuted in Buddhism for lack of experiential evidence, but there are other ways of affirming human identity and freedom that do not hinge on such an independent ego, and on such a basis it remains meaningful to cultivate greater freedom, rather than falling back on philosophical beliefs that one does or does not already have it. These pragmatic responses of the Buddha don't logically settle the question of the existence of free will, but they do offer meaningful guidance for pursuing greater freedom, while leaving the ultimate status of free will in metaphysical limbo. William James lends his support to this pragmatic orientation when he writes, 'if free will *were* true, it would be absurd to have the belief in it fatally forced on our acceptance. Considering the inner fitness of things, one would rather think that the very first act of a will endowed with freedom should be to sustain the belief in the freedom itself' (James, 1899/1958, p. 129).

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[5] *Samyutta Nikāya*, I.14; *Itivuttaka*, 53.

[6] *Sutta Nipāta*, 937; *Majjhima Nikāya*, III.31; *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, V, VIII; Gen Lamrimpa (2002); Thupten Jinpa (2002).

Volition and Action in Early Buddhism

At first glance, this Buddhist position may seem identical to that of certain contemporary cognitive scientists and philosophers of mind. For instance, in his book *The Illusion of Conscious Will*, psychologist Daniel M. Wegner writes: 'It seems to each of us that we have conscious will. It seems we have selves. It seems we have minds. It seems we are agents. It seems we cause what we do… it is sobering and ultimately accurate to call all this an illusion' (Wegner, 2003a, pp. 341–342; 2003b). Nowhere in the brain do neuroscientists find any control centre that might serve as the neural correlate of an autonomous self, nor do they find any evidence of an independent self that causally influences brain functions. On the contrary, the brain appears to function according to its own internal mechanisms, with no independent self acting as a king or presiding judge governing and evaluating the brain's activities. According to this materialistic view, all the causal influences on mental processes occur in the complex machinery of the brain, beyond the range of introspective awareness (Ainslie, 2001, p. 40; Dennett, 2004, pp. 244, 254).

But these apparent similarities conceal fundamental incompatibilities between Buddhism and scientific materialism. Whereas many materialists believe that brain activities precede and causally generate all mental processes and that those processes themselves consist of brain activity, the Buddha turned this supposition on its head by declaring, 'All phenomena are preceded by the mind, issue forth from the mind, and consist of the mind'.[7] Central to this Buddhist emphasis on the primacy of the mind in relation to behaviour is the role of the mental factor of volition, or will, which determines which actions have moral consequences. Indeed, the Buddha virtually equated volition with *karma* when he declared, 'It is will, O monks, that I call *karma*; having willed, one acts through body, speech, or mind'.[8]

Only voluntary actions produce karmic results, and the magnitude of the moral consequences of one's actions corresponds directly to the degree of one's mental balance, intelligence, and understanding. Thus, the moral consequences of the actions of a person who is mentally ill or brain-damaged are relatively light, while those of a person of sound mind and clear understanding are relatively heavy.[9] This corresponds closely to modern principles of jurisprudence. Moreover, it

[7] *The Dhammapada*, I.1.

[8] *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, III.415.

[9] *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, I.249–253.

is incorrect to think that previous karma determines *all* of one's experiences and feelings. Although all feelings that arise *together with* one's initial awareness of sensory stimuli are the result of past karma, the feelings that arise following such stimuli are not predetermined by past karma but are rather the result of fresh karma associated with the way one responds to those stimuli. And so acts of volition are conditioned both by *prior* influences as well as by other factors, such as the quality of one's awareness, that are *simultaneous* with it.[10] In this sense, Buddhism asserts a measure of free will in so far as one can reflect on one's options and decide on the best course of action in terms of its moral suitability.[11]

Determinism and Moral Responsibility

Some contemporary scientists and philosophers assert that determinism — defined as the view that there is at any instant exactly one possible future — is compatible with moral responsibility. Daniel Wegner, for instance, argues that our actions are completely determined by brain activity prior to the conscious experience of making decisions, so that consciousness doesn't really do anything. For this reason, conscious will is an illusion, but it is nevertheless the person's guide to his or her own moral responsibility for action, and moral action is quite real (Wegner, 2003a, pp. 59, 224, 241). But he fails to provide any cogent explanation for how something that is an illusion and doesn't do anything can be responsible for moral action. It should also be noted that his fundamental premise that conscious will is an epiphenomenal, causally ineffective illusion has been scientifically and philosophically shown to be inconclusive (Lau, Rogers and Passignham, 2007; Dennett, 2004, pp. 228–242).

Philosopher Daniel C. Dennett takes a virtually identical position, and his arguments face this same fundamental dilemma. On the one hand, he declares that each human being is nothing more than an assemblage of roughly a hundred trillion cells, each of them a mindless mechanism, a largely autonomous microrobot functioning in strict accordance with the laws of physics and biology. On the other hand, he writes, 'Human freedom is not an illusion; it is an objective phenomenon, distinct from all other biological conditions and found in only one species, us' (Dennett, 2004, pp. 2–3, 305). In an elaborate but fundamentally specious series of arguments, he tries to assert the

[10] *Milindapañha*, 134–138; *Visuddhimagga*, 532, 535; *Patthāna*, I.1.

[11] *Majjhima Nikāya*, I.415–416.

existence of 'autonomous human agents' who exercise free will as their ability to control action whenever there are no constraints, coercions, or compulsions that limit their behaviour. Yet nowhere does he provide any compelling argument for the existence of a human agent either among or apart from the mindless robots that totally make up a human organism.

Those who argue for a 'compatibilism' between determinism and moral responsibility seem to be moved by independent motives. Intellectually they have persuaded themselves that the entirety of human existence, and even reality as a whole, can be thoroughly explained in terms of the human categories of physics and biology. This is the basis for their determinism. But they also feel a psychological imperative to affirm moral responsibility, without which human civilization is virtually inconceivable. Caught on the horns of this dilemma, they are forced to illegitimately introduce morality and purpose into the mindless, deterministic activities of atoms and cells, which is unwarranted by all that we currently know about physics and biology. This conundrum makes for bad science and bad philosophy.

As noted previously, according to materialistic determinism, based on classical physics, the precise condition of the universe shortly after the Big Bang causally sufficed to produce the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963, which implies that Lee Harvey Oswald was a passive cog in the deterministic machinery of the physical world. Since his actions were predestined billions of years before he committed them, it is absurd to speak of his having any kind of free will, and it is irrational to assert that he was morally responsible for his actions.

Some contemporary Buddhist scholars, while shunning materialism, do argue for the compatibility between determinism and moral responsibility, citing the Buddhist principle 'When this exists, that comes to be, with the arising of this, that arises'.[12] Whether the universe is deterministic in accordance with purely physical causality (materialism) or in accordance with mind–matter causality (Buddhism), it is still deterministic, implying that the present is thoroughly conditioned and determined by the past. If this is true, then Lee Harvey Oswald had no more choice to kill or not kill John F. Kennedy in the world according to Buddhism than he had in the world according to materialism. If at any instant there is exactly one physically possible future, as determinism maintains, then the present is absolutely predetermined by the past. This offers no wiggle room for any kind of freedom or moral responsibility whatsoever.

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[12] *Samyutta Nikāya*, II.28; Federman (2007); Harvey (2007).

As noted previously, the Buddha rejected belief in any theory — either deterministic or indeterministic — that undermines our sense of moral responsibility and our inspiration for abandoning vices and cultivating virtue. The lack of any philosophical or scientific consensus regarding free will, despite centuries of conceptual enquiry east and west, suggests that the causal relations among volitions, actions, and their consequences are so complex and subtle that it may be impossible to fully comprehend them with reason alone.[13] On the limits of the intellect, William James wrote, 'For my own part, I have finally found myself compelled to *give up the logic*, fairly, squarely, and irrevocably. It has an imperishable use in human life, but that use is not to make us theoretically acquainted with the essential nature of reality… Reality, life, experience, concreteness, immediacy, use what word you will, exceeds our logic, overflows and surrounds it' (James, 1977, p. 96).

It is vital not to become conceptually immobilized by one's current lack of decisive understanding of the scientific or philosophical rationale for asserting the existence of moral responsibility. The important thing is first to recognize here and now the myriad ways in which we are *not* free to make wise choices and follow courses of action that are truly beneficial to our own and others' well-being, and at the same time to devote ourselves to the cultivation of such freedom. William James again offers sound guidance: 'As long as one continues *talking*, intellectualism remains in undisturbed possession of the field. The return to life can't come about by talking. It is an *act*; to make you return to life…' (*ibid.*, p. 131).

The Buddhist Ideal of Freedom

In light of a modern definition of freedom as the capacity to achieve what is of value in a range of circumstances (Maxwell, 1984), the Buddhist tradition clearly emphasizes that ordinary sentient beings are *not entirely* free, for we are constrained by mental afflictions such as craving, hostility, and delusion, which in turn stem from our ignorance of the true nature of reality; and, in so far as we lead our lives under the domination of these afflictions, we remain in bondage to their resultant suffering. But the Buddha posed the truly astonishing hypothesis that suffering and its internal causes are not intrinsic to the minds of sentient beings, for in every being there exists a 'brightly shining' dimension of awareness that, though veiled by adventitious

[13] *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, II.80.

defilements, is itself free of ignorance and mental afflictions, and this can be revealed through spiritual practice.

Theravada Buddhist commentaries identify this radiant mind as the naturally pure 'ground of becoming' (*bhavanga*), the resting state of the mind that is not included among the six modes of consciousness, namely the five physical senses and ordinary mental consciousness. This dimension of consciousness manifests in dreamless sleep and at death, and during the waking state the mind momentarily reverts to it between periods of engaging with its objects of cognition.[14] Under normal circumstances, one generally has no clear recognition of this relative ground state of awareness, but it can be vividly apprehended with the meditative achievement of highly focused, stable attention (*samadhi*), in which awareness is withdrawn from all objects, sensory and mental. The ground of becoming described in early Buddhism bears a strong resemblance to accounts of the substrate consciousness (*alaya-vijñana*) in the Great Perfection tradition of Tibetan Buddhism (Wallace, 2006a, pp. 14–18, 95–96; 2007, pp. 45–48).

This brightly shining mind may alternatively be understood as the unconditioned state of awareness that is present after an *arhat*, one who has achieved nirvana, passes away, never to take rebirth again. Such consciousness, which transcends the five psychophysical aggregates, is said to be non-manifesting, timeless, and unconditioned.[15] Since it is unborn — not newly created by prior causes — and is not the consciousness of someone or something other than oneself, it must already be present in each sentient being before the achievement of nirvana. This realm of consciousness is beyond the scope of the conceptual mind, so its possible influence on the minds of ordinary sentient beings is unimaginable.

Such transcendent, pristine awareness appears to be similar to the Buddha nature presented in Mahayana Buddhism and to the pristine awareness (*rig pa*) taught in the Great Perfection. This primordial dimension of consciousness is said to be the deepest source of our yearning for happiness and liberation, and this is said to be the ultimate ground of freedom for all beings (Paul, 1980, p. xiii). But since its nature transcends the domain of the conceptual, rational mind, it does not lend itself to rational analysis, and its way of impacting the mind and the rest of the natural world likewise lies beyond the realm of philosophy. It may be known directly through non-dual awareness, but it cannot be an object of the intellect.

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[14] *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, I.61; Harvey (1995, pp. 145–146, 155–179).

[15] *Dīgha Nikāya*, I.223; *Majjhima Nikāya*, I.162.

A modern Buddhist understanding of 'free will' does not focus on the question of whether the will is conditioned by prior causes and conditions, but rather the extent to which we have the freedom to make decisions that are conducive to our own and others' genuine happiness. Such choices are conditioned, to be sure, but by wisdom and compassion, rather than by craving, hostility, and delusion. Meditations practised with the ordinary mind are conducted within the field of causal interactions, leading to greater and greater freedom to make wise choices. When one 'breaks through' ordinary consciousness to pristine awareness, one transcends the realm of the intellect and of causality, and it is here that true, primordial freedom is discovered. This is not something that can be proven with logic, but it may be realized through direct experience arising from sustained, rigorous meditation practice. The Buddhist tradition would concur with James when he declares, 'Thought deals thus solely with surfaces. It can name the thickness of reality, but it cannot fathom it, and its insufficiency here is essential and permanent, not temporary' (James, 1977, p. 112).

The path of spiritual practice may be likened to the process of refining gold ore that is contaminated by impurities. The first step on this path is to cultivate a wholesome way of life, avoiding behaviour that is injurious to one's own and others' well-being. On this basis of ethics, one proceeds to balance the mind through the cultivation of focused attention, for, as the Indian Bodhisattva Shantideva cautioned, 'a person whose mind is distracted lives between the fangs of mental afflictions'.[16] When the mind is subject to attentional imbalances such as laxity and excitation, it is as if one's psychological immune system is impaired, and so all kinds of mental problems can easily overwhelm it.

The cultivation of focused attention has a direct and important bearing on morality and the freedom of will. William James declared in this regard, '"*In what does a moral act consist* when reduced to its simplest and most elementary form?"… *it consists in the effort of attention by which we hold fast to an idea* which but for that effort of attention would be driven out of the mind by the other psychological tendencies that are there' (James, 1899/1958, p. 126, my italics). And the French philosopher Charles Renouvier, greatly admired by James, defined free will as the sustaining of a thought because one chooses to when one might have other thoughts (Renouvier, 1912).

With the development of sustained, vivid attention, one's awareness may be introspectively focused on one's own feelings, desires, thoughts, and intentions as they arise from moment to moment. As the

[16] *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, VIII.1.

Indian *arhat* Nagasena taught King Milinda, the Buddhist practice of mindfulness entails directing one's attention to wholesome and unwholesome tendencies and recognizing them as such so that one may cultivate the former and reject the latter.[17] Such discerning, meta-cognitive awareness allows for the possibility of freely choosing whether or not to allow a desire to lead to an intention or to let an intention result in verbal or physical action. In short, freedom of will depends on the ability to recognize the various impulses that arise involuntarily in the mind and to choose which among them to accept or reject (Wallace, 2006b, pp. 77–127).

Without such internal monitoring of one's mental states and processes, the mind is bound to fall under the domination of detrimental, habitual conditioning, with the attention compulsively focusing on attractive appearances, thereby reinforcing craving, and on disagreeable appearances, thereby reinforcing hostility.[18] Such misguided attention is also prone to lead one to view as permanent what is impermanent, as satisfying what is unsatisfying, and as a self what is not-self.[19] To overcome such delusional ways of viewing reality, one must add to the cultivation of meditative quiescence (*shamatha*) the development of insight (*vipashyana*) through the close applications of mindfulness to the body, feelings, mind, and phenomena.[20] Only through the unification of meditative quiescence and insight is complete freedom gained from mental afflictions and their resultant suffering, thereby revealing the innate purity of the brightly shining mind.

The Middle Way Beyond Determinism and Indeterminism

The challenge of determinism remains: If all decisions and actions in the present moment are completely determined by prior causes and conditions — be they physical or mental — how can any kind of free will be posited? As I have proposed earlier, the definition of determinism allows for no such freedom. Fatalism is the unavoidable implication of determinism as surely as later events are inevitably set in stone by prior conditions according to determinism. On the other hand, while some philosophers look to the indeterminism of quantum physics as a way out of fatalism, it is difficult to see how this strategy

[17] *Milindapañha*, 37–38.

[18] *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, I.3; *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, I.200–201; *Samyutta Nikāya*, v. 64–65.

[19] *Vibhaṅga*, 373.

[20] *Samyutta Nikāya*, v. 156.

allows for a clear, coherent picture of a human agent exercising free will. Most interpretations of both determinism and indeterminism are based on the assumptions of metaphysical realism, namely that:

- the world consists of mind-independent objects;
- there is exactly one true and complete description of the way the world is; and
- truth involves some sort of correspondence between an independently existent world and a description of it (Putnam, 1990, p. 30).

The Middle Way (Madhyamaka) propounded by Nagarjuna constitutes an utter rejection of the reification of time and causality that underlies most versions of metaphysical realism.[21] All causally conditioned phenomena arise according to a process of dependent origination in dependence on three factors: (1) prior causes; (2) their own constituent parts and attributes; and (3) conceptual designation. A chariot, for instance, arises in dependence on: (1) the materials that were used to make it and the carpenter's work of assembling it; (2) its individual components; and (3) the conceptual designation of 'chariot' that is imputed to this assembly of parts. The first mode of dependence entails prior causes and conditions resulting in a subsequent product. The dependence of the chariot on its parts is simultaneous: the whole and the parts exist simultaneously. And the chariot as the designated entity comes into existence simultaneously with its conceptual designation as such.

For all phenomena the basis of designation is never identical to the object that is imputed on that basis. To take the same example, a chariot is imputed on its chassis, wheels, axles, and shaft, but none of those parts — either individually or collectively — constitute a chariot. The carriage as a whole comes into existence simultaneously with the imputation of that label on those parts, but they could have been designated otherwise. What this implies is that the entities that make up the world we live in arise in dependence on our conceptual designations, and they exist relative to the conceptual framework in which they are embedded, and not intrinsically, independent of all conceptual frameworks. There is freedom in the present moment to view the world in accordance with different conceptual frameworks, and this is where free will may enter into our experience. By shifting our way of framing appearances and making sense of them within our cognitive framework, we alter the very nature of the world as it arises from

[21] *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, I, V, XVII.

moment to moment relative to our way of viewing it. For example, a natural calamity may be viewed either as an unmitigated adversity, or it may be seen as an opportunity to cultivate deeper compassion. The categories of 'adversity' and 'felicity' are ones we superimpose on experience; they are not absolutely thrust on us from outside.

The relativity of all phenomena with respect to the cognitive frame of reference from which they are experienced is put to use in many Buddhist practices in order to overcome mental afflictions and cultivate wholesome mental states and behaviour. The Tibetan Buddhist genre of 'mind training' is explicitly designed to help one transform all circumstances, felicitous and adverse alike, so that they arise as aids to one's spiritual growth and maturation. By conceptually designating events in ways that support virtue rather than habitual mental afflictions, one alters the world one inhabits; and this constitutes a fundamental freedom of choice (Thupten Jinpa, 2006; Wallace, 2001). As long as one is acting from the dimension of ordinary, dualistic consciousness, the most one can hope for is to condition the mind in ways that are conducive to one's own and others' genuine happiness. Only with the breakthrough to pristine awareness does one discover a dimension of freedom that is beyond the intellect and beyond the realm of causal conditioning.

According to the Middle Way, even time itself has no inherent nature of its own, independent of conceptual designation. While past events certainly influence the present, the way we now designate the past also determines how it arises to us relative to our present cognitive frame of reference. Obviously, there is an asymmetry between the past and present, according to both Buddhism and modern physics. We can think whatever we like about a piece of rotten fruit, but it won't reverse the process of decomposition. More generally, we cannot change the past as it exists independently of our modes of perception and conception. But we can shift it *relative* to our cognitive frames of reference, and, according to the Middle Way, there is no past, present, or future independent of all such frames of reference. And so the past may impact us in any number of ways, depending on the manner in which we conceptually designate it in the present. By designating the appearances stemming from the past in different ways, the very nature of past events correspondingly shifts relative to those current modes of designation.

Drawing an analogy in modern physics, the physicist Eugene Wigner commented, 'We do not know of any phenomenon in which one subject is influenced by another without exerting an influence thereupon' (Wigner, 1983, p. 178). By reifying time, we assume that

the past influences the present but is uninfluenced by the present; and that the present influences the future but is uninfluenced by it. Such unilateral influence runs against the grain of the current scientific understanding of the physical world. Likewise, the Madhyamaka view denies the inherent existence of all three times, supporting the view that they can all influence each other, relative to the cognitive frame of reference from which they are designated.

Physicist John Archibald Wheeler explained this principle in terms of quantum physics: 'It is wrong to think of that past as "already existing" in all detail. The "past" is theory. The past has no existence except as it is recorded in the present. By deciding what questions our quantum registering equipment shall put in the present we have an undeniable choice in what we have the right to say about the past' (Wheeler, 1983, p. 194; Wallace, 2007, pp. 76–80). For example, the systems of measurement used by cosmologists here and now serve a crucial role in bringing about what appears to have happened in the early evolution of the universe. He concludes: 'Useful as it is under everyday circumstances to say that the world exists "out there" independent of us, that view can no longer be upheld. There is a strange sense in which this is a "participatory universe"' (Wheeler, 1983).

More recently, physicists Stephen W. Hawking and Thomas Hertog have likewise proposed that there is no absolutely objective history of the universe as it exists independently of all systems of measurement and conceptual modes of enquiry (Hawking and Hertog, 2006, p. 123527; Bojowald, 2006). Instead, there are many possible histories, among which scientists select one or more based on their specific methods of enquiry, which they choose on the basis of prior experiences and preferences. According to Hawking, every possible version of the universe exists simultaneously in a state of quantum superposition — as a set of possibilities rather than concrete realities. When we make a measurement, we select from this range of possibilities a subset of histories that share the specific features measured. To relate this to the Middle Way: this is an expression of our freedom to choose the bases of designation on which we may again freely choose to designate a history of the universe as we conceive of it, based on that subset of histories. In these ways, we may exercise our free will not only to establish our past but also to frame our present and sow the seeds of our future.

The empty, or non-inherent, nature of time is also incorporated in Buddhist Vajrayāna practice, in which one 'takes the fruition as the path'. This means that, while one is still an unenlightened sentient being, one cultivates the 'divine pride' of regarding oneself as a

Buddha on the basis of the Buddha that one will become in the future. Likewise, one develops the 'pure perception' of viewing the entire environment and all its inhabitants as manifestations of enlightened awareness, which is an emulation of the pure perception of a Buddha. In these ways, one draws the transformative power of one's future enlightenment into the present moment, with the understanding that the future is not inherently real and separate from the present. In such practice, based on a realization of emptiness and the Buddha nature of all beings, one is free to enable the future to influence the present.

Another way of interpreting the cultivation of divine pride is to identify one's own Buddha nature, or pristine awareness, as the basis of designation for one's own identity here and now. The bases of designation of one's ordinary sense of personhood are one's current body and mind. When one refers to oneself as having past and future lives, the basis of designation for one's identity is one's substrate consciousness, which, according to the Great Perfection, provides the continuity from one life to the next. When one assumes the identity of a Buddha, as in the practice of divine pride, the basis of designation for this sense of self is one's own, timeless Buddha nature. In the practice of the Great Perfection, one non-conceptually rests in this timeless, pristine awareness, allowing actions to arise spontaneously and effortlessly, aroused by the interplay of one's own intuitive wisdom and the needs of sentient beings from moment to moment. In this way, one realizes a kind of freedom that transcends the demarcations of past, present, and future.

As we have seen, the Buddha rejected the philosophical extremes of both determinism and indeterminism and discouraged his followers from embracing any view that might undermine their inspiration to devote themselves to an ethical life in the pursuit of liberation. In pragmatic terms, as ordinary sentient beings we do not have free will to achieve what is of value within our range of circumstances in so far as our minds are dominated by ignorance and its derivative mental afflictions. But the Buddha declared that these sources of bondage are not inherent to our very existence, that they may be dispelled through sustained, skilful spiritual practice. The Middle Way shows how free will may operate within the nexus of causal relations through time; teachings on the Buddha nature reveal the ultimate source of our freedom, and the Vajrayana tradition, including the Great Perfection, demonstrates how the freedom implicit in the teachings of the Middle Way and the Buddha nature may be fully put to use in the swift realization of liberation and enlightenment.

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